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ABSTRACT

For the 2 years the author was a kindergarten teacher in a public school, the students did journal writing. This was a new initiative in the school, which was performing low and had been placed under "registration review." The idea of journal writing in kindergarten was met with a lot of resistance from the other teachers who felt kindergarten children could not read much less write. The author learned that children did not need to read to write: the students were not only able to read their text but also obtained skills to be better readers and writers. They became emergent readers with an ability to distinguish between the oral and the written language. Students wrote in their journals everyday starting in September and ending in June. Nonreaders became readers, and parents were ecstatic about the results. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/RS)

Journal Writing with Kindergarten Children

Leoney Jarvis

Abstract

Journal writing in kindergarten is a must. It enhances a child's ability to focus on an activity for longer periods of time which facilitates improved learning. They learn skills that prepare them for success in later grades. I have learned that young children write to read, (Clay, 1975).

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For two years while I was a kindergarten teacher in a public school, my students did journal writing. This was a new initiative in my school. This idea was met with a lot of resistance from my colleagues who felt kindergarten children could not read much less write. I willingly took the challenge and embarked on an amazing journey. I learned that children didn't need to read to write. I discovered that through this process of writing that my students were not only able to read their text but also obtained skills to be better readers and writers. They became emergent readers with an ability to distinguish between the oral and written language. This process was not easy.

To get the full benefits of journal writing, my students wrote everyday starting in September and ending in June. . Journal writing was just one aspect of a literacy program which began in my school's district. In the two years I taught kindergarten, my students did journal writing. That period was one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. I saw non-readers become readers. Parents were ecstatic about the results. Despite its positive effect, journal writing was heavily criticized by my colleagues. Their participation in the program was minimal. Their children did journal writing maybe once or twice a week without consistency.

In one case, I was told that the children copied what was written on the chalk board. (Those children did not do any writing of their own.) The senior teachers on my grade level felt that the children were not readers and that it would be pointless, to say the least, to have them engaged in writing. I, on the other hand, was fully committed to this project. As a new teacher in the public school system, I didn't know what I was getting into but I willingly took the challenge. The results were astounding. My students learned to read by writing.

I enjoyed working with my students. There were challenges within the school. My school was a low performing school and it was placed under registration review (S.U.R.R.-School Under Registration Review). The principal embarked upon a balanced literacy program for every grade. Journal writing was a major aspect of that program. The principal took an aggressive stance to move the school upward and forward. Of course not everyone agreed with her agenda. The upper grades were engaged with the writer's workshop. Also there were many literacy workshops for all staff. Journal writing in kindergarten was a pilot program. In order for this program to work, my students wrote everyday without fail. They wrote even on half days. At the end of the school year, more than eighty percent of my students were reading. This was very surprising since all of them started out as non-readers in the traditional sense. It is for this reason that I strongly recommend and support journal writing in kindergarten. Journal writing in kindergarten was not new. There were many studies supporting this type of writing, (Clay, 1975; Fisher, 1996; Glazer, 1985; Sulzby et al, 1988; Vernon, 1993 and Vukelich and Golden, 1984).

What research says?

Young children effectively gain understanding of print by actively participating, on a

daily basis, in writing. The mechanics of their writing becomes crystallized when they realize the objective and purpose of writing, (Atkins, 1984). When children learn that they are writing a message and that message will be read, they are more deliberate in their thinking. They know what they want to say. Also regardless of the form of writing, they can read it and will correct it if any words are missing. Carol Chomsky, (1971), linguist and author, says that young children should write first and read later because it is by their own writing behavior and knowledge that they begin to make sense of the written word. She believes that once they know the alphabetic principle of sound, children can make their own words, (p. 297). This is a marvelous view because I have observed children, who cannot read in the conventional sense but are able to write and read their written work. In this sense, they are writing to read. It matters not the form of writing, whether scribbling, or just strings of letters, they are able to tell a story. Many of these stories are written with either elaborate details or in a simple sentence. However, at the onset children faced with fear and lack of confidence, approach writing reluctantly. Many will say, "I don't know how to write;" others will say, "I can't spell." With those responses, one would deduce that young children do have some sense of what writing entails. They know that one writes with words. Certainly they have made the distinction between writing and drawing. They also know that there is a correct way to represent words.

What children know

Atkins, (1984), tells us that young children learn to write by writing. At first, they use inventive spelling. As they become more proficient in reading, their spelling become more traditional, (p. 5). Further, she says, children make their own rules and generalizations about English and become coherent writers when they are aware "of others as readers of what they

write,” (p. 5). Like Piaget, (1955), Ms Atkins says that the children’s writing is egocentric.

“Children’s early writing is totally egocentric.

Self-expression, fun and play are the real objects,
writing only the medium... It is this total lack of
concern of others opinions that allow children to
experiment, to invent spelling, and begin to work
through the generalizations and rules they need for
future progress in writing.”

For Atkins, at age seven children’s writing takes on a serious tone because of their awareness of an audience other than themselves. Depree and Iversen, (1994), however, argue that many children before starting school have already some control of conventional writing, “as a result of their interactions with environment, e.g., road signs, advertisements, TV, board games and books,” (p. 65). Their writings maybe egocentric yet readable. Regardless of their egocentricity children like their work to be read. The idea of an audience is elusive. They become very upset when they are not able to share their work.

Children know that in order for their work to be read, it must be in some form of writing. This writing may be a drawing, a drawing and scribbling, scribbling only, drawing and letters or a drawing with some words. Those forms of writing are developmental. That is, as children mature, their writing changes from one level to the next, from scribbling to drawing, to letter strings to inventive spelling to conventional print, (Clay, 1975). Certainly maturation is a key to children’s learning but what is equally important is the environment (Rovaldo, 1994; Chomsky, 1971; Vulkelich and Golden, 1984; Fisher, 1991; Tangel and Blachman, 1992; and Armington,

1997).

The environment

Young children who are not yet readers must be immersed in print. My classroom has print everywhere. There is a word wall, a library with all types of books, (read-a-loud, big books, picture books, books for guided reading, nursery rhymes, charts, poetry, etc). The purpose of a print rich environment is to help young children to make sense of written texts. They need to make the connection between the written and the spoken word. Kindergarten children need to know that there is a relationship between written and oral language. They need to know that letters have sounds and that these sounds form words. They need to know also the order and structure of print. That is, words are written from a left to right, top to bottom direction. This leads to the whole notion of the concept of print, (Depree and Iversen, 1994). This process takes a long time. That is why I strongly recommend that writing begins in kindergarten. For the past three years I have taught first graders and many children strong with writing. Some, like kindergarten children do not know what print is. It is difficult on both the student and the teacher. This is the age at which children are to be reading. Additionally, when teaching in a low performing school the pressure for success become increasingly painful.

Understanding Print

Richgels, et al, (1992) asserted that five and six year old children learn to write by applying phonemic awareness strategies. Those authors conducted a study with preschool, kindergarten and first grade children. Their design was to determine what governed young children's perception of English words. Was it by "an onset and rimes or by ... phonemes within an onset and rimes." The children were asked to spell a dozen words. The study concluded that

by the children's spelling was dominated by phonemic awareness rather than onset and rimes. Ball and Blachman, (1991), studied phonemic awareness with kindergarten children. Their study involved 151 public school children. They conducted a battery of assessment involving a variety of activities, (pp. 51 - 55) such as word recognition, inventive spelling, letter/sound recognition, etc. Like Richgels, et al, this study concluded that phonemic training heavily impacted writing skills. Model writing was another strategy by which children learn to write.

Writing was a major part of our curriculum; I modeled writing for the children every morning. We met as a group in the library everyday, I wrote the morning message. The message consisted of a greeting, the day of the week, the weather and a personal note from a student. The children took turns sharing something that they did. A typical message was: Good morning boys and girls. Today is Monday, April 20, 2002. It is cold and sunny outside. Jaime said, "I like to eat pizza." A message remained on the easel for daily reading and later placed on a hanger in the library for more reading. The children's work, other than what's in the journal, was displayed around the classroom. The alphabet was an important tool in my classroom. It played a significant role in helping the children understand print. My school devoted 90 minutes each day for literacy. The first part of our literacy block was dedicated to alphabet activity (letter sound recognition, word search, etc.). As I wrote the morning message on chart paper, I sounded out the beginning and ending sounds of each word. For example, for the word "morning", I said, m-m-m-or-n-ing. As I wrote the morning message, the words resonated on the line. The alphabet said in a sing-song fashion. A ah, ah, apple, b, bah, bah, bear, etc. I did not teach it in order. I did this to foster letter recognition and not letter memorization. I never sang the ABC song with the children. However, as I assessed the children's knowledge of the

alphabet, some of them would refer to the song as a way of identifying the letters. Since I did not teach the alphabet that way, I thought that was an interesting phenomenon. I encourage every teacher to have a print rich environment in their classroom. A significant aspect of such an environment is the display of the children's work. This would not only foster self worth but also promote learning.

My Program

My kindergarten children were not readers. Some of them may have had previous experiences with print such as with books and the alphabet. They all knew the McDonald's sign and other signs or symbols of environmental print. Yet having to write information on paper was a novel experience. My second year with kindergarten children was an enlightening experience. I conducted my literacy lessons very much the same way I did in the first year with one exception. Before I introduced journal writing, I tested my students' knowledge of print. During a reading session and after doing a picture walk, I picked children randomly to tell what are on the pages of a book. This book was a read-a-loud. The children mentioned and described the pictures. Many repeated what others had said. I covered one picture on a page and asked what was on the page. All the children looked baffled. One brave soul said, "Black things." When asked what those black things were, the same student did not answer. I told them the black things were words. Not knowing where words came from, I told the class the alphabet helps us to make words by putting the letters together in a special way. I referred to their names, objects in the class, words on the wall, etc. To get them focused on print, I did a number of activities. One major activity that I did everyday was sound and print relationship. While writing the morning message, and as my hand was over my mouth, I said to them that "What I say with my

mouth is what I write on the chart.” I spoke and wrote simultaneously. I put my hand over my mouth the same way when I read to them. For example, if I read “the lion roared,” I said each word as I pointed to the matching printed word. This process helped to reinforce the connection between sound and print. Another activity I did was sight word recognition. As stated earlier, we had a word wall in the classroom. I used the word wall for word recognition. I used big books as references for sight words. As I read from those books, I would highlight sight words, such as me, I, the, boy, girl, she, etc. I would select children to find the word on the page. Another or the same child was asked to find the same word in the room. Yet another activity, the children were given post-it notes to write words. They were encouraged to use the words on the post-it notes in their journals.

When we started the journals all the children for both years began on the same level. The first week of entries were drawings and dictations taken by me or another adult. (While I was at this school, there was a mentor for my grade. When she was in the room, she interacted with the children. She also took dictations from the children.) By October some of their drawings were accompanied with letters. In November, the students were showing signs of recognizing print. Many chose to copy the print in the room. As I assessed the children’s writing, I observed that a child’s writing was fluctuated between recognizable print and strings of letters.

How the children know words

It is difficult for kindergarten children to stay focused. It is equally difficult to get them to write at first. Everything I wanted the children to do, I modeled. When I read to them from a big book, I used a pointer with an apparatus shaped like a “window” attached at the end. This window was made from construction or oak tag paper. The “window” pointer served to restrict

the children's vision to one or two words at a time. I made various size "windows" to correspond to a lesson being taught. In using the pointer, a word or words were pointed to as the neighboring words were blocked out. This apparatus was pivotal in helping children to remain focused as I read stories to them as well as helping them to find words around the room. What a child saw, in essence, were one or two words at a time. My students knew words when they were able to locate them in the room and use them correctly. Each child had a writing folder. They kept additional writings in this folder. Also in the folder was a word list printed alphabetically. Each word that a student used correctly was printed on the sheet. The students were able to refer to this list as they wrote in their journal. The children also knew words when they read them in books.

Journal Writing

The first year I did journal writing, we started in September. The second year began in October. The reason being was that we were waiting for commercial journals to arrive. In my first year with journal writing, my assistant and I stapled five sheets of blank 8 ½ X 11 paper. The pages were numbered and dated. All this was done by hand. We used this format because we wanted the children to know the physical structure of books. I wanted the children to know that books have numbered pages. The use of the date helped to keep the pages in order. We wrote the days of the week in the journals for word recognition. These journals also had a cover page. The cover had the weekly date, a title (My Journal), and the children's names which were stated as "Written and Illustrated by". The cover page was pre-designed and copied weekly. In the second year the journals were dated with a stamp and the pages were not numbered. My assistant did not come to my room until the afternoon after we have done journal writing. With

the hand made journals, my assistant and I distributed the journals with the corrected page each day. With the bounded journals the second year, I placed a rubber band over the unused pages to prevent the children from writing all over the book. We did journal writing in the morning since the bounded journals were to be used the entire year, I instructed the children to write on both sides of a page, one for each day. It was during the first year also the children's journals were stored in empty cereal boxes. Letters were sent home to parents informing them of our writing curriculum and the need for cereal boxes. The boxes were painted by the children with a color of their choosing. The boxes lined the windowsill. I wrote each child's name on his cereal box. After writing, each child was responsible to store his/her journal in his box.

Journal writing was a daily activity. For the first week of this activity, I suggested that they could write about themselves, their family or a pet. The family became a favorite subject for most of the children. Later in the year, they began to write about their classmates, or characters in a book. Some children just copied words, other children's names, the morning message, etc. There was very little resistance to writing. At first, they said, "I can't write." I avoided using the word "draw" because some children confused drawing with writing. What I said to them instead was, "write me a story."

What They Wrote

There were no significant changes in how and what the children wrote over the two years. Each child grew at his/her own pace. The subject they choose was about their families or about their interaction with each other. From September until mid-November, the children drew pictures. The children dictated their stories to me. After mid-November, I observed that the children were writing one letter words and strings of letters. There were no scribbling just

letters. I was amazed at one student's writing. This student not only wrote one letter words but used space among his letters. The letters also represented a complete sentence. As this child's writing progressed to inventive spelling, he not only added more letters to each word, he continued to space each word. Also his topic remained the same for each entry, "I W T T P W M F"; (I went to the park with my father.) That was this student's first writing entry. The above statement took on more letters. He wrote that story until I asked him to expand his story. I asked him: What happened at the park? What did they do or see? Did he enjoy being at the park with his father? The student added one more sentence. As teachers, we try to get out students to write a lot but sometimes, their may involved only one word or phrase. Writing one sentence is an awful lot of words. Whatever the students wrote was acceptable.

Generally, the children wrote with capital letters. Later in the year, they used upper and lower case letters intermittently. Spelling progressed phonetically Some children did that earlier than others but by the year's end all the children were clearly writing some form of conventional print.

My Role

Once the routine for writing was established, my role was to motivate and encourage my students to write. I did not force anyone to write. Children after the first week of writing were encouraged to choose their own topic. When someone could not choose one, I offered suggestions. I also participated in journal writing. After ten to fifteen minutes into writing, I would leave my writing and walk around the room. The children were allowed to write from thirty to forty-five minutes. A lot of talking took place during this time. More time was given when a child required it. They were reminded of the time frame. As I walked around the class,

I took dictations. I did not get to each child everyday. I saw each child two to three times a week. After writing, the children were given the opportunity to share their stories. At first, I shared my story. Then the children took turns reading their stories. I usually read the stories of those who were shy. The structure for writing was that it was done everyday at the same time by all the children.

The purpose of my program

Journal writing served two purposes. (1) Socially the children were able to communicate their ideas as well as their feelings. One child wrote about moving to a new house and that her house is clean. Another wrote, "Me and Jason are got Mard," (Me and Jayson are getting married.) My colleagues who opposed journal writing in kindergarten believed that this activity robbed the children of socialization. I think that this activity gave the children more of an opportunity to be sociable because they sort out each other for help with spelling and with ideas. They were constantly talking with each other. In fact some of their stories were about their interaction with each other. (2) The children learned about the concept of print. As they began to make the connection between speech and print, they were able to write words and from words wrote sentences. Further, they were able to develop directionality of print- top to bottom and left to right. Once they understood print, they became emergent readers. This was demonstrated in the children's ability to distinguish when a word was left out of their stories. As they read their stories, they were able to tell right away that something was missing and without my telling them what it was. This skill was a revelation. Most of the children were able to pick up books and read them. At the end of Kindergarten, more than 80 percent of my students were

readers. The significant thing I learned from journal writing was that children write to read (Clay, 1975).

Writing is a Developmental Process

Marie Clay (1975) researched young children's writings and concluded that there are several stages of print for them. They are drawing, scribbling, and one letter word, strings of letters, word list, inventive spelling, transitional print and conventional print. I observed all of these stages with my student except for scribbling. I don't know the reason for this but scribbling was not present among their writings. As stated earlier, the sign of "writing" with my students was drawings, which a number of them referred to them as writing. Most of my students made drawings until about mid-November in both my first and second year teaching kindergarten. After this period, I observed drawing with lettering or string of letters. The students who wrote those entries had difficulty with word formation up until June. By June they were still writing strings of letters. Those who were still drawing added strings of letters by the beginning of the new year. Progressively, the children's writing shifted to either inventive spelling or a mixture of inventive and conventional spelling. There were many students who made remarkable progress. Anna was among the students whose writing was exceptional. Anna began writing like the rest of her peers. First, she drew pictures which were done quite well. Then she added strings of letters. By the end of June Anna's work clearly showed an understanding of writing. Anna wrote in complete sentences; she used capitals, space and punctuation marks appropriately. Daisy, another of my students, on the other hand, wrote mostly lists. Destiny came to my class in January, 1999. It was clear from the beginning that she had prior knowledge with writing. Although she basically wrote lists, Daisy, like Anna, developed a

keen sense of writing, demonstrating the ability to space, punctuate and capitalize appropriately.

Writing lists was a favorite with other children. Those students made lists of their classmates' names. Others copied the days of the week or wrote numbers. Not every child writings progressed to the stages mentioned above. Some children skipped some stages while others developed from one stage to the next. The child, for example, who started with one letter words moved to inventive spelling by January.

Conclusion

The process of writing is not an easy task. But as young children write everyday, the task becomes less difficult. I firmly believe that writing should begin in kindergarten because what is required for writing is to young children a maze. There are many paths that they must travel before they make their way out. They have to distinguish letters and recognize that those letters have corresponding sounds which leads to words. They must know the directionality of print. That is, print begins at the left and continues in a straight path to the right. It continues from the top of a page until it reaches the bottom of the page. With this foundation in kindergarten, students will have greater success in future grades. As a result of my experience working with kindergarten children, I strongly recommend journal writing in kindergarten. In assessing my students' work, I can only conclude that journal writing is a prelude to reading. Kindergarten children write to read.

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